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Committees:

- Appropriations
- Financial Institutions
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2001

Session Wrap Up

September/October 2001

Dear Friends,

What a year it's been! It seems like an eternity since the session began in January, but while much work remains to be done, much was indeed accomplished. There have been many important victories for individuals and families from Spokane. And whether they occurred in the regular 105-day session or one of the three special sessions, they were definitely worth fighting for!

For instance, we passed legislation to open a veterans' home in Spokane so that Eastern Washington residents wouldn't have to travel across the Cascades to Orting or Retsil. And we prevented halfway houses for our state's most dangerous sexual predators from being opened in Airway Heights or Medical Lake.

But this long session was not without its low moments. The budget written and passed by House and Senate Democrats will almost surely lead to either deep cuts in services or large tax increases in just two years. That gives us a little over a year to help save tax dollars by changing the way government does business so that your families and jobs don't fall victim to runaway government spending.

Please take a few moments to read through this brief newsletter. Many issues considered by the Legislature this year will have a direct and profound impact on your families. It has been an honor representing you in Olympia this year. We look forward to building on our successes during the 2002 legislative session.

Yours truly,

Brad Benson

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- Trade & Economic Development
- Transportation



6th District

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TRANSPORTATION UPDATE

It's no secret that Washington is experiencing a growing transportation crisis. After all, Spokane ranks as the 59th most congested city in America – but also the 4th most congested “small” city, according to a recently released federal study.

It's also no secret that Washington is experiencing a growing tax crisis. We are, even after the passage of I-695, which repealed the motor vehicle excise tax, one of the ten highest-taxed states in the nation (and we don't even have an income tax!).

Unfortunately, when the governor finally awoke to the fact that a good portion of our state was stuck in hours of frustrating traffic jams each day, he chose an all too familiar solution: taxes!



If recent history has taught us anything, it's that raising taxes isn't necessarily the answer to every problem. If that were the case, our schools would be operating at peak efficiency, children and low-income seniors would all have health care, and welfare wouldn't even exist anymore. Obviously that's not the case – and so it is disappointing that the governor wouldn't bother to study the trans-

portation problem any further than to declare the need for massive gas tax hikes to pay for an unspecified list of projects that would hopefully alleviate congestion in Washington.

It's just not that simple. Moreover, it doesn't need to happen this way.

Consider the most recent plan that negotiators had briefly agreed upon. It would have raised gas taxes, gross weight fees for, diesel fuel taxes, and sales taxes on vehicles to generate approximately \$5 billion over the next decade to pay for a bonding package that would total roughly \$8.6 billion in projects.

Over that same time – ten years – the state will already collect more than \$300 billion in taxes (adjusting for inflation). Instead of raising taxes on working families and individuals living on fixed incomes (who would be hit hardest by the gas tax hike), why don't we change the way government does business? Why don't we look for ways to save that \$5 billion over the next ten years – especially since that comes to just 1.7 percent of the total our state will collect during that time?

By dedicating those modest savings to transportation, we could fully fund this massive transportation “fix,” and do so without raising taxes!

Unfortunately, identifying savings to produce that revenue hasn't been at the top of many peoples' lists here in Olympia. For too long, government has operated under the assumption that whenever it runs out of money, it can always take more from the people.

But obviously, the people of this state won't stand for that sort of business any longer. Judging by the calls, letters and e-mails that have flooded our offices over the course of the session, there are ten people adamantly opposed to tax increases for every one person who supports them.

But simply because we oppose raising taxes – especially without a guarantee that those new revenues will yield definite results – doesn't mean

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we aren't concerned with Washington's transportation problem. We believe that it is possible to get a better return on the investment taxpayers already make in state government – and that we can indeed fund Washington's most pressing transportation needs without raising your taxes.

As the Legislature continues debating this issue this year and next, we'll continue working to make certain that your voices are heard in Olympia. And we'll continue working to find new ways to solve our transportation problems without government taking more from your wallet.

2001-2003 BUDGET UPDATE

One of the biggest tasks the Legislature faced this year was the state's two-year budgets (the operating budget, the capital budget and the transportation budget). With 147 members of the House and Senate, it's safe to say there were roughly 147 different views of what the final product should look like.



As representatives of Washington's 6th District, we tried our best to follow the advice and concerns that so many of you communicated in your telephone calls, e-mails, letters, personal office visits – or when we spoke at town halls or other events in Spokane.

While we are pleased that several important projects such as the Spokane Intercollegiate Re-

ENERGY ASSISTANCE FOR YOUR FAMILY?

Are you – or is someone you know – struggling to pay your electricity bills this summer? If so, there is help available. This year, the Legislature passed a plan to provide low-income energy assistance.

For more information, please contact the Spokane Neighborhood Assistance Program at (509) 456-7111, or by contacting your local utility or citizen action networks that distribute the energy assistance funds.

search and Technology Institute and the Mirabeau Point Community Complex received funding, the bottom line is the Democrats, who control the Senate and governor's office, crafted a budget that spends \$667 million more than the state will collect in revenues over the next two years. The reserves built up during Republican control of the House will disappear in no time at all.

Because this budget also includes nearly \$700 million in "one time" revenues that won't be available again in the next biennium, it means that the state will be starting out its next two-year budget cycle \$682 million short of what it would need to maintain existing programs and services at the current level.

The result is that in two years, we will likely be faced with choosing between deep cuts in important state services (education, health care, etc.) or large tax increases – either of which could prove harmful to your family and ours. For these reasons, neither of us was able to vote for the final budget the governor signed into law.

State Representative

Brad Benson

State Representative

John Ahern

EDUCATION: 'A' is for Accountability

During the 1999-2001 budget cycle, our state government spent more than \$10 billion (about 46 percent of the General Fund budget) on public schools serving students from Kindergarten through the 12th Grade.

But are we really seeing a solid return on our investment?

Consider this: only one-third of our state's 10th graders are passing their math requirements and just 41 percent are meeting their writing requirements. Furthermore, nearly 12 percent of our state's 18-24 year-olds have failed to earn a high school diploma. We can and must do better!

This year, we passed two important bills. The first would offer new alternate routes to teacher certification to bring talented professionals into our classroom (while also helping lessen our state's growing teacher shortage). The second would help retain our best teachers by offering retired educators the option of continuing classroom work without losing their retirement benefits.

Unfortunately, House Democrat leaders blocked key accountability bills designed to guarantee all students are given every opportunity to succeed. And, despite unanimously passing the House last year, we were unable to get a vote on important legislation to help make our schools safe for all students to learn. Instead, Democrats pressed for so-called "anti-bullying" legislation that would have spent time and resources on questionable programs.

CRIME & PUBLIC SAFETY

As legislators, keeping Spokane neighborhoods safe is our primary concern – and our first responsibility to you and your family.

Most notably, we worked to ensure that halfway



houses for our state's worst sexual predators weren't opened in Airway Heights or Medical Lake. Placing these Level 3 offenders (those most likely to re-offend) so close to our neighborhoods would have been a disaster waiting to happen.

Until there is a cure for the diseases affecting sex offenders, or a new treatment that is proven effective, we'll continue to work with the governor and other officials to ensure the safety of Spokane's neighborhoods from the threat these criminals pose to us all.

Cracking down on identity theft

The crime of identity theft is an increasing problem in our society. It threatens an individual's credit history and good name. This session we adopted legislation to combat this serious crime.

Senate Bill 5449 expands the definition of the crime of identity theft, increases the potential penalties, requires businesses to assist victims by providing access to information, and allows the court to enter orders requiring the correction of the victim's financial records. It also allows a credit bureau to block any negative information that may appear on a person's credit report and limits the number of times it may contact a debtor in an attempt to collect on debts as a result of identity theft.

In addition, we adopted legislation that limits colleges and universities from using a student's Social Security number for identification purposes.

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AHERN VETERANS' HOME BILL BECOMES LAW

Back in June, the governor signed my bill to open a veterans' home in Spokane at the former St. Luke's hospital facility.

Fully 28 percent of Washington's veterans live east of the mountains, and there is no reason for us not to have a quality facility on our own side of the mountains – especially when a practical and affordable opportunity like this location is available.

Working closely with the Department of Veterans Affairs and others around the state, Brad and I were able to navigate through every possible obstacle that the 49-49 tie in the House and the near-evenly divided Senate could throw at us. It wasn't so much politics that kept slowing things down, but the complicated processes that come with split control in the Legislature.

Once this facility opens, Eastern Washington veterans and their families and friends will not have to criss-cross the state to veterans' homes in Retsil and Orting (both more than 7 hours' drive from Spokane).



Rep. Ahern serves Spokane as a member of the House Transportation Committee.

BENSON PLAYS KEY ROLE IN PASSAGE OF SEVERAL CONSUMER PROTECTION MEASURES

As co-chair of the Financial Institutions and Insurance Committee, I hear legislation relating to



Rep. Benson in his role as co-chair of the Financial Institutions and Insurance Committee.

financial services, including the safety and soundness of state banks and credit unions, the regulation of consumer credit and lending and the regulation of securities and investments, as well as insurance issues, such as the rates and practices of insurance companies. I sponsored the following bills to protect banking and insurance consumers that were recently signed into law.

- House Bill 1347 creates a process for structured settlement agreements to protect the interest of beneficiaries and dependents. This bill will be particularly effective in protecting disabled individuals who need the payments for their long-term care, because it creates a process that includes disclosure requirements and judicial oversight.
- House Bill 1036 requires the Department of Financial Institutions to examine alien

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banks at least once every 18 months. An “alien bank” is a bank organized under the laws of a foreign country, but which has an office located and doing business in our state. This common-sense measure enables the Department of Financial Institutions to protect Washingtonians from the risks of troubled banks.

- House Bill 1792 creates a holding company act for health care service contractors and health maintenance organizations, similar to the one regulating the activities of traditional insurance companies. This bill gives the state insurance commissioner regulatory authority regarding the holding company activity of HMO's and health care contractors to protect the health care interests of friends and loved ones in Washington.

6th District Offices

If you have questions or comments on the issues highlighted in this newsletter, or if you are having difficulty in dealing with state government, please don't hesitate to contact us in our district offices.

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